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A Week in Books

Offered a straight choice between the politics of reason and of revelation, the voters of the most powerful nation ever to exist recently chose the latter by a clear – if slender – margin. “Values” swung the US election; or rather, the values that wish supernatural doctrine to have a leading role in public policy. Some 140 years before, Matthew Arnold had stood on “Dover Beach” and heard the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of the receding “Sea of Faith”. It always struck me as odd that critics should read that retreat as a one-way process. The metaphor tells you otherwise. Tides, after all, come back after they go out.

Now that the waves of religious belief have surged back into social life, how will secular-minded writers and artists respond? On page 26, John Gray outlines the challenge lately flung at “atheist” thought by the Oxford theologian Alister McGrath, and points out that McGrath’s rationalist enemies may cherish a firm faith of their own. As often happens, though, creative imaginations may sense, and show, the turning of a tide before the theorists start to clash. Today sees the release of Roger Michell’s film *Enduring Love*, taken from Ian McEwan’s 1997 novel. In creepily compelling ways, both book and film dramatise an assault on the secular, scientific mind by a crazed kind of absolute belief. After viewing the film, and re-visiting the book, I feel that each dates from a radically different era.

Although never a deeply “faithful” adaptation, Michell’s movie has plenty to commend it – not least the riveting performance of Rhys Ifans as the shaggy stalker, Jed. As in the book (albeit with a grungier edge), Jed acts as a human virus whose sticky devotion wrecks the moral and mental immune-system of the Darwinian science writer, Joe. However madly, Jed believes – and his armour-piercing faith blasts through every chink in the defences of the rationalist. When I first read the novel, Jed’s siege of the infidel soul felt like a random strike almost out of nowhere. One millennium, two holy wars and many “faith-based” atrocities later, he seems more like some guided missile launched by the spirit of the age.

Jed yearns to love the unbeliever into faith – love him to death, if need be. As do so many post-millennial zealots. One could even argue that the film half-endorses Jed’s pitying view of godless Joe. McEwan’s novel closes with a pastiche case-history that consigns Jed’s lethal “love” to the language of clinical psychiatry. The film ends otherwise. Michell’s direction, and Joe Penhall’s script, hint that the beleaguered scientist might have withstood the stalker’s onslaught better if he’d been a caring, sharing, family-friendly kind of guy, rather than a dry old Darwinian stick. If you can’t manage the God bit, at least protect yourself with Motherhood and Apple Pie. Though the book does reveal the perils of Joe’s cerebral solitude, it never sounds so smugly sure of that.

This is by no means a case of damning a film as unworthy of its book, in that pointless critic’s way. Rather, some epochal shift has intervened to redefine the meaning of this story about a secure and enlightened form of existence brought low by passionate conviction. On 12 September 2001, a newspaper commentary on the previous day’s events noted that “Our civilisation, it suddenly seemed, our way of life, is easy to wreck when there are sufficient resources and cruel intent. No missile defence system can protect us.”

The author was Ian McEwan, who four years earlier had shown in miniature how swiftly the realm of confident reason can be routed by a “weak” challenger. I recall a strange phrase of Shelley’s, when in the *Defence of Poetry* he speaks of gifted writers as “the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present”.

Barry Miles *does* remember the Sixties and has written about them, too. He talks to LIZ THOMSON about the Beats, the Beatles and his biography of Frank Zappa

King of the counterculture

Biography BARRY MILES

It’s always said that if you can remember the Sixties, you weren’t really there. As if to prove the point, Mick Jagger was forced to return a £1m advance for a memoir when he discovered that his past was something of a blank. Barry Miles – Miles to all who know him – has no such problem, with the result that he is one of the foremost chroniclers of a decade that began in the dull monochrome of post-war austerity and ended in glorious Technicolor.

“I experimented with most things,” he agrees, over nothing stronger than a glass of red wine in the Fitzrovia flat that has hosted William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Frank Zappa, the subject of his latest biography. “Heroin, mescaline... pretty much everything once or twice, speed quite a bit, cocaine a lot, later on, and I smoked a lot of dope. But I wasn’t tripping, no. I was just too busy. The idea of taking two days off to trip – who had time for that? I had a bookshop to run. There was a very hedonistic side to the hippie scene, an awful lot of lying around, and I was never that kind of person. I like to do stuff.” So, despite all those Roundhouse happenings, which saw the birth of Pink Floyd and Soft Machine, Miles did not, to paraphrase John Lennon, turn off his mind, relax and float downstream.

Indeed, he was busy. The bookshop in question was the celebrated Indica in London’s Southampton Row. John Lennon once came in with Paul McCartney looking for a book about Nietzsche, though it took Miles a few seconds to work that out from his pronunciation. Lennon bought *The Psychedelic Experience*, Dr Timothy Leary’s take on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Its opening pages provided the Beatle with the first line of “Tomorrow never knows”.

It was in Indica, in November 1966, that Lennon met Yoko Ono at the preview of her show *Unfinished Paintings and Objects*. And it was from the basement below that Miles and John Hopkins, known as Hoppy, ran *International Times*, Britain’s first underground newspaper.

Both enterprises were supported, financially and otherwise, by McCartney, John Dunbar (whose girlfriend was Marianne Faithfull) and Peter Asher. Brother of Jane (McCartney’s girlfriend), Asher was half of the duo Peter and Gordon, for whom McCartney had provided two transatlantic hits, “World Without Love” and “Woman”. Indica was a hub of

Barry Miles was born in Cirencester in 1943. After studying art at Cheltenham College of Art, he came to London, qualifying as an art teacher. His working life began at Better Books, and he went on to found the Indica Bookshop and Gallery, which, in turn, gave birth to *International Times*. He was one of the team behind the 1965 Royal Albert Hall poetry reading, a marathon that featured Adrian Mitchell, Gregory Corso and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. At Paul McCartney’s suggestion, he founded Zapple, the spoken-word arm of The Beatles’ Apple record label. In the 1970s, he went to live in New York, working with Allen Ginsberg on a catalogue of his tape archives and writing for *New Musical Express*. He returned to London to spend a year editing *Time Out* and made his home in London and France with his partner, Rosemary Bailey, and their son Theo. His many books include biographies of Jack Kerouac, Ginsberg and McCartney, *Hippie*, and his 2002 memoir, *In the Sixties*. His new work is a biography of Frank Zappa (Atlantic, £19.99).

what *Time* magazine famously called, in its cover story for 15 April 1966, “London: the swinging city”.

But Miles was so busy, so in the thick of things, that he had little time to stand back and assess what he was a part of. “I knew it was a lot better than Cirencester,” he says, “but I didn’t realise how significant it was going to be, and I certainly didn’t think people would look back on it in the way they do now.”

“When I went to art college, you looked back on Paris in the Twenties and it was a serious scene. That’s how people look back on the Sixties, which are now something mythic and unreal. I’m sure Paris was really no big deal either. And much of the Sixties was boring because many of the people who come into bookshops are boring. People bend your ear and you can’t escape. But sometimes it was John Lennon doing the talking, and that was OK.”

Books have shaped Miles’s life and,

through them, he has helped shape the lives of others, first at Tony Godwin’s legendary Better Books in Charing Cross Road and then at Indica. He imported – from Grove Press and City Lights in the US and Olympia Press in France – books by Ginsberg, Burroughs *et al* that we now take for granted. He has written quite a few himself and, a genuine witness to the 1960s, is frequently called on to consult with museums and write catalogues.

Slight and pale, his once blonde hair now a Warholesque white, Miles remains easily recognisable from all those photos which show him hanging out with stars. While his conversation is littered with references to Paul and Jane and Allen and others he knew well, he avoids the faux familiarity of the professional name-dropper whose personal contact scarcely extends beyond a handshake.

The friendship with Frank Zappa (who died in 1993) dates back to 1967, when he and his band, the Mothers of Invention, came to London as part of their first European tour. “The book was something I’d had at the back of my head for years, so when Grove Atlantic came to me I agreed immediately.” Zappa, “a difficult person to pinpoint because he’s such an outsider and a loner,” produced 72 albums, all on his own label. Revered in Germany and Sweden, he is these days spoken of in the same breath as modernists Edgar Varèse and Pierre Boulez – who recorded *The Perfect Stranger* with the prestigious Ensemble InterContemporain – rather than his rock’n’roll contemporaries.

Like Zappa, Miles grew up entranced by the harmonies of doo-wop, which he heard in a Cirencester café that was a hangout for US servicemen. “I ingratiated myself by drawing a very elaborate menu, so I got free Coca-Colas. Someone had stolen a 200-play jukebox from the base and it had all these wonderful records on it.”

At home he listened to Radio Luxembourg, loud and clear thanks to the antenna Miles’s father had rigged up in the garden – a bit of army-inspired DIY he probably came to regret. It was, he recalls, “a regular working-class background” lived in “a very backward part of the Cotswolds... Milk was delivered by horse and cart in a churn and arrived warm. So did the bread. We cooked on an oil stove. It was like being back in the 19th century.” At weekends, he would escape to his